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ABSTRACT

The strengths and weaknesses of five highly publicized ideas in education are noted. The first is the idea of heterogeneous grouping. Advocates seem to think that there is no room for homogeneous grouping of students by ability, but both plans should be used because in society, individuals interact with others regardless of ability but they also seek peers for interaction. A second "scared cow" is cooperative learning. Frequent assessment and evaluation are required to ensure that cooperative learning works as it should. Team teaching is a third idea that bears scrutiny. Many human relations problems may surface in team teaching, and it is important to allow for individual differences among instructors. A fourth concept that requires scrutiny is that of measurably stated objectives. There are dangers in the rigidity of measurably stated objectives that may inhibit real learning and limit the focus of instruction. The final "sacred cow" is the notion of teaching everybody in the public schools. There are good reasons for excluding certain highly disruptive students from the regular classroom if their presence hampers the learning of other students. (SLD)

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Assessing Five Sacred Cows in Education

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ASSESSING FIVE SACRED COWS IN EDUCATION

Generally there is a rallying cry to support certain ideas in education. Those advocating these ideas may state that research says that _____ . The research states then goes on to endorse their very own ideas. Other research is left out which refutes what has been affirmed as an absolute. Testimonial also are given to substantiate what is indicated as "research says____ ." Sometimes it is "undemocratic" to do the opposite of what the writer/speaker advocates. Democracy then is in the eyes of the beholder. Consumers of educational literature and content need to be good assessors of what has been read and said.

Five heavily publicized ideas in education will be analyzed in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Strong advocates of heterogeneous grouping believe that all forms of "tracking" should be eliminated. Homogeneous grouping and tracking are equated. Reasons given for a very strong emphasis being placed upon heterogeneous grouping are the following:

1. student achieve a a higher level with heterogeneous or mixed achievement levels of students in a classroom as compared to homogeneous grouping.
2. it is democracy in action with mixed achievement levels as compared to the gifted/talented being taught in a single room.
3. all students should have access to the same sophisticated knowledge since this will be needed later in school as well as in society and at the workplace.
4. each student, regardless of ability or talent, should achieve high standards and not be held back from optimal achievement. At J. E. B. Stuart High School in Fairfax Count, Virginia, one of their goals is to have <u>all</u> 11th grade students reading on the eleventh grade (Checkley, 2000).
5. students in the lower ability groups receive the poorest quality of teaching as compared to more talented groups of learners. They are labeled as being lazy and indifferent to learning. These students too receive more of drill and the simpler kinds of knowledge and skills.

There seemingly is little or no room left for homogeneous grouping of students, according to advocates of heterogeneous grouping. Certainly, there should be times when gifted and talented students should be taught in a homogeneous setting where they may think critically and creatively as well as engage in problem solving experiences. Here, in a positive learning environment, students may

challenge each other's thinking and reflect upon what has been taught and discussed. What is best to guide optimal student achievement should be emphasized in grouping for instruction. Slow learners may hold the higher achievers back from achieving more optimally when heterogeneous grouping is used continuously. Both plans of grouping students for instruction should be used flexibly. Why? In society, individuals interact with others regardless of ability levels, such as in buying goods and services. They also seek out their own peers for visiting and interacting, based on interest/social factors.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning has received considerable attention in the educational arena. Here, students are to work in mixed achievement levels to discuss and learn together. Working by the self would then be frowned upon. Some have even quoted research which says all students do better in cooperative as compared to individual endeavors. Reasons provided for stressing cooperative learning in the classroom are the following:

1. students like to work together with others in the classroom. In contrast, Gardner (1993) identified eight intelligences. Two of these are intrapersonal (preferably working by the self to achieve optimally) and interpersonal (working with others to achieve as much as possible as a preferred way of learning).
2. students benefit in learning from each other where mixed achievement levels are in evidence. In contrast, my daughter Diane Ediger (2000) who experienced much cooperative learning in the public schools believes that the more talented and gifted do all or most of the work and the rest are not accountable for achievement.
3. students achieve at a higher rate as compared to individual approaches in learning. In contrast, there is evidence that gifted/talented learners achieve less in cooperative learning. Even if students achieve at the .05 level of statistical significance in favor of cooperative learning vs traditional procedures, there are always those who would do better using tractional methods of instruction. Teachers need to individualize instruction and provide for the needs of all learners.
4. students learn social skills within a group setting that might otherwise not be the case. In contrast, there are plans of grouping which would alternate individual and committee endeavors.
5. students learn to care for each other in cooperative learning. In contrast, there is no guarantee this would happen. Unless carefully supervised, students might also learn to dislike each other.

Cooperative learning is difficult to supervise. Each person in the group needs to achieve as much as possible. Learners also must

respect each other; otherwise, it probably is not a cooperative project. Pupils who are not liked and accepted find it very difficult to work in a hostile atmosphere. Individuals need to have chances to do the desirable things in a collaborative endeavor. Being shunned or have negative comments made by other truly does defeat opportunities to learn effectively. Ideas need to be shared in a quality cooperative learning center. No idea should be ridiculed, but all comments may be positively evaluated. Content presented should circulate among members in cooperative learning. Quality procedures of democratic living and learning should be in evidence. The cooperative learning group should be periodically assessed to learn from the good things done as well as from inequities exhibited. Developing feelings of safety, belonging, and having esteem needs met are important in cooperative learning. Certainly, cooperative learning should not be a leveling of abilities process, but each should learn as much as possible and have personal intelligences used positively.

Team Teaching

Team teaching has been advocated for three to four decades as being highly recommended for instruction and learning situations. Generally, one person is designated as leader of the team. There may be two to three other team members. More than one mind is better than one mind in making curricular decisions, according to its advocates. Reasons provided for the advocacy of team teaching are the following:

1. teachers are not isolates in a classroom, but interact with other professionals.
2. teachers may learn from each other in a team setting; it has built in education features.
3. teachers may experience flexibility in teaching and learning situations when team members agree to do things differently.
5. critical thinking is involved when teachers assess each others ideas and come up with a new synthesis.

The writer has listened to many teachers in his graduate classes state that human relations can be quite a problem. Nine months is a long school year when team members do not get along well. Each member should have a voice if he/she wishes to join a teaching team and not be forced to do so. A member should be permitted to leave a team if this is wanted and desired. Being a team member and with whom should not be carved in stone. Principals need to respect the wishes of teachers.Team teaching is advocated to assist students to achieve more optimally, not to be there for the sake of having team teaching. Even if students with team teaching achieve better at the .05 level of significance, there are always those in that group that would

achieve at a higher rate in more traditional plans of grouping for instruction. By looking at test scores of those in the experimental group containing team teaching, one can sort out those who might well do better in non-team teaching procedures.My son, a chemical engineer, (Kent Ediger, 2000) stated when he was a student with inherent team teaching, large group instruction was indeed impersonal. Very few got to respond to questions raised by the team of teachers in a class period and many questions were ignored. Thus, the large group instruction was too large in size. My son definitely favored a smaller group with a single teacher teaching learners.

The following are truly problems for teachers in team teaching:

1. finding time to plan together before, during , and/or after the school day.

2. supervising students in large group instruction with the team leader or teacher member doing the teaching. It is difficult with 60 students or more in large group instruction in attempting to provide for individual differences and needs.

3. supervising individual projects and activities is a problem when making the rounds to adequately supervise each student. But, perhaps, most teachers too are hurried in meeting needs of learners in a self contained classroom. When supervising a student teachers in a small sized classroom with 32 pupils, the writer could not walk between the rows of desks. It was that crowded. Upon grading the student teacher in student teaching, she cried at the last visitation in fearing she would receive an F grade due to poor discipline. Was she overjoyed when receiving a B grade! Her planning, effort, and methods were outstanding, but she was caught in an undesirable classroom situation. The writer still wonders if she should have received an A grade. Grades are difficult to give indeed. How would that student teacher have done with a roomful of twenty eager to learn pupils with a good cooperating teacher? She probably would have been outstanding indeed! Here, again, grades may mean very little. Much depends upon the quality and number of learners in a classroom and having a supportive, quality supervising teacher.

4. engaging in cooperative assessment of each student's progress. Here, ideas need to be pooled pertaining to how well each student is doing when team taught. A team of assessors being very knowledgeable about the evaluation process should be able to do well when diagnosing and remedying learner achievement. To find time for assessment, the team may have to appraise learner achievement ongoing within a lesson. However, the information does need to be pooled in order for it to be a team endeavor.

5. planning the large group, small group or committee work, and individual study times. There should be three levels of instruction. Certainly, the large group instruction has its weaknesses due to not

being able to provide for individual differences during this time which then necessitates small group and individual endeavors.

When weaknesses are pointed out for each plan of instruction, teachers and supervisors need to take out the kinks and work toward improvement of teaching and learning.

Measurably Stated Objectives

The measurably stated objectives movement appears in several forms. Thus, objectives are written in a very precise manner. As a result of instruction, a student either does or does not achieve a stated objective. This makes it possible to use machine scoring of a vast number of students to ascertain how well they are achieving in school. A report card can then be provided when comparing schools and districts on the rate of achievement of students. The lay public may then perceive how "well" schools are teaching students. Mastery learning is in evidence.

Learning activities are to be aligned with the objectives. A variety of activities may be used in teaching, but rote learning and memorization may take a center stage. Why? Students need to achieve measurably stated objectives which are very precise whereby one correct answer only will suffice for use in machine scoring. Alignment too makes for economy in instruction since digressing with student questions and comments wastes time that should be used in attaining objectives. If the objectives are predetermined by the state department of education, then accountability by teachers in having students achieve the objectives becomes a key factor.

Evaluation procedures are also aligned with the objectives. Generally, multiple choice items will be used to measure student achievement. Teachers may spend much instructional time on teaching test taking skills to students so that the latter may attain at a higher rate on stated mandated tests. The objectives, learning activities to achieve objectives, and evaluation p procedures are all tightly aligned. There is a rigidity about this procedure that has mastery learning as its model.

Weaknesses given for using measurably stated objectives in teaching are the following:

1. they tend to stress recall of information excessively and thus minimize higher levels of cognition in the process.
2. they tend to stress those objectives which have measurable content for students to achieve.
3. they limit curricular input from students in that the objectives are determined prior to instruction.
4. they are written so that it is easy to assess and measure student achievement.

5. they emphasize teaching that which can be measured.

Teaching Everybody in the Public Schools

The beliefs are for schools to be democratic they need to accept each and every student in the public schools. This has worked havoc in many classrooms. Good teachers have quit teaching due to unruly pupils ruining ongoing teaching and learning. Many teacher fell they are ill equipped to deal with students that cause severe problems in the public schools. With everyone, eligible in age, attending the public schools, there are bound to be future prison inmates in public school classrooms. The recent shootings occurring at Columbine High School, suburban Denver, Colorado illustrate the point. Here, there were two boys from middle class homes who planned and killed 14 persons in Columbine. Shortly before that time, two boys at Jonesboro, Arkansas had pulled the school alarm so that more students could be shot when they were coming out of the school building for the fire alarm. This takes sophisticated thinking for a nine and eleven year old to plan how to maximize the number to be killed from a false fire alarm.

In St. Louis, county, Missouri, a fifteen year old behaviorally disordered boy in his first day of being mainstreamed raped and killed a fifteen year old girl in school (St. Louis Post Dispatch, 1995). Three Kirksville, Missouri Junior High School students murdered a 32 year old mother of four children near Marshalltown, Iowa. These three students attended Kirksville Junior High School for one day after these horrible murders had occurred. All three are serving life sentences with no chance for parole (Kirksville Daily Express, October, 1994 issues). Cases such as these happen on a somewhat regular basis. There are too many students in the public schools that should attend at a different place, such as a special school. It is stretching it when saying that in a democracy all students should be and must be educated in one building.

Why should selected highly disruptive students not be taught in a regular classroom?

1. it disrupts too many classrooms for good instruction to occur.
2. it takes much time away from instruction when having to work with a misbehaving student.
3. it does not provide the necessary time to assist a disruptive student to achieve. A very low student/teacher ratio, 5/1, is needed to provide for the needs of a behaviorally disordered student. The ratio proposed is a general figure but would depend upon the severity of the disorders.
4. it does not represent democracy as a way of life when many students are disrupted in the classroom from learning and the behaviorally disordered student needs adequate assistance within a low

student/teacher ratio.

5. it prevents students from achieving optimally intellectually, emotionally, and in the affective domain.

The five sacred cows need to be studied and analyzed. A synthesis should evolve whereby each student achieves as optimally as possible.

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